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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ENA, AND PRM/ANE

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SUBJECT: UNHCR-JORDAN: IRAQI REFUGEES WILL ONLY RETURN HOME
WHEN IRAQ IS READY

REF: SECSTATE 51405

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Reftel recently established voluntary repatriation as the goal of U.S. assistance policy for Iraqi refugees and asked post to approach government and IO officials to present the policy. In response to the action request, the Ambassador met with UNHCR Country Representative Imran Riza to explain that the USG would look for ways to help create domestic conditions in Iraq which would favor and promote repatriation with dignity and security. Riza said the greatest barrier remains the perceived and actual conditions on the ground in Iraq. The Government of Iraq (GOI) has still not established structures and procedures to encourage refugee returns. Riza believes that the GOI should establish an inter-ministerial committee to oversee the repatriation process. Riza also reports that newly arrived Iraqis relay tales of direct threats and increased lawlessness inside Iraq. This is the cause for an increase in the number of newly arrived refugees, especially minorities, in Jordan and Syria. While the Government of Jordan (GOJ) ministries have impeded organizations from conducting a thorough census of the Iraqi population, practical cooperation between UNHCR and the GOJ has been good and continues to improve. End summary.

Repatriation is Possible, but...

12. (C) Speaking with the Ambassador, UNHCR's Imran Riza said that Iraqis could be encouraged to repatriate from Jordan, but fears about conditions on the ground in Iraq prevent most from seriously preparing to return. According to a newly completed UNHCR-Jordan "intention" survey, 90 percent of all respondents indicated that they did not wish to return in the near term. The Iraqi community in Jordan appears convinced that extra-legal detentions and arrests are on the rise in Baghdad as the GOI struggles to deal with a difficult security situation. The refugees fear that arrests are being used to settle scores among Iraqi factions and they have little confidence in the government's ability to provide protection if and when they return. In addition to security, Iraqis say they are equally concerned about economic conditions, which is a new finding since the previous survey one year ago.

13. (C) UNHCR continues to formally register between 600 to 700 Iraqi refugees per month. Approximately half are new arrivals who say they are fleeing persecution by militias and armed gangs who are operating with impunity in Baghdad. The other new registrants are long-term residents whose economic situation has deteriorated since their arrival, prompting new requests for assistance.

Much needs to be done.

¶4. (C) Riza said that successful repatriation planning should begin in Iraq. In recent meetings with Iraqi officials in Baghdad, Riza found the GOI's rhetoric hostile towards refugee assistance and repatriation, with high-level officials referring to the refugees as unrepentant Baathists and looters. Riza recommended that the GOI publicly encourage returns. Once public messages become more welcoming, the GOI then needs to reorganize itself to support returnees. Many refugees believe that the GOI is ill-prepared to help them restart their lives and this is one cause of their reluctance to return. Riza recommended that the GOI create a repatriation committee made up of officials from all interested ministries and agencies with authority to oversee all matters concerning assistance to returning refugees and IDPs.

¶5. (C) Riza also recommended that the international community work with UNHCR and the GOI to rationalize assistance so that programs available inside Iraq are comparable to medical, educational, and financial assistance available outside Iraq. However, Riza asked that assistance levels be improved inside Iraq without lowering the quality of assistance available to needy refugees abroad. According to Riza, continuation of assistance outside of Iraqi has two benefits: 1) assistance relieves pressure on the host countries, making them more amenable to hosting current and future refugees; and 2) refugees who feel secure and do not have to worry about meeting basic day-to-day subsistence needs are more likely to thoughtfully consider and make plans to return home.

AMMAN 00001449 002 OF 002

UNHCR's funding levels are low

¶6. (C) Riza explained that UNHCR would appeal for funds to support repatriation through the UNHCR Iraq office. Riza's office is focused on maintaining the humanitarian space and assistance for the increasingly vulnerable Iraqis in Jordan. According to Riza, UNHCR Jordan is under funded for its current operation. UNHCR headquarters in Geneva authorized Riza to obligate 50 percent of his request for operational funds, but only 33 percent of the overall UNHCR appeal through the consolidated appeals process has been funded to date. The UNHCR regional offices have been encouraged to seek funding on their own. However, that funding, once secured, flows into the central coffers of UNHCR headquarters and does not always end up with the original country office which solicited it directly from donors. In addition, European donors have refused to support new programs, saying that the estimated number of needy refugees in Jordan remains inflated and does not warrant continued assistance outside of Iraq. Riza argued that even despite inflated numbers this was a specious argument that ignored the presence of genuinely needy Iraqis in Jordan.

The USG can help

¶7. (C) UNHCR identified tertiary health care as a critical need for Iraqi refugees. A number of refugees in Jordan suffer from chronic, life threatening ailments that require expensive surgery and/or long-term treatment. Ideally, Riza would like to see the GOI come up with a health care plan to cover refugees for catastrophic illnesses. This type of intervention by the GOI would be a positive gesture towards refugees, many of whom feel the government would be hostile to their return.

¶8. (C) Riza also called on the USG to continue to press the GOJ for legal status for refugees, as well as for the right to work and receive vocational education legally in Jordan. He also asked that the USG encourage the GOJ to allow an independent survey of refugees to determine their numbers and

their levels of need. Riza said that UNHCR had hoped to work in cooperation with the GOJ to complete a joint survey of Iraqis. However, after initially approving the project, the GOJ Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation had so diluted the scope of work that it became useless and UNHCR withdrew from the exercise.

Refugees Are Safe in Jordan

18. (C) According to Riza, the GOJ is cooperating on refugee protection. The Ministry of the Interior issued an order in the spring instructing police officers and labor inspectors not to arrest Iraqis for labor code violations if they could present UNHCR refugee documentation. The Government sends its law enforcement personnel to UNHCR-run seminars on refugee protection and refugee rights. The GOJ continues what one official described as a "one-eye-closed policy," maintaining tough restrictions on foreign labor and visitors while actually allowing Iraqi refugees to live, work and use services in Jordan without formal refugee status. Riza warned that this tolerance could be dependent on continued international financial support for refugees.

19. (C) Finally, Riza agreed that the GOJ should take measures to encourage repatriation. Currently Jordan waives penalties for Iraqis traveling back to Iraq, but imposes a ban on reentry into Jordan and stamps the travelers passport to indicate the ban. Eliminating these measures would encourage Iraqis to make exploratory trips while considering a move back home.

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